



TIPS AND SUGGESTIONS

CHINESE LEARNING FOR BEGINNERS

Resources & Materials

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Learn Chinese For Beginners

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Introduction

Mandarin Chinese Learning Time Planning Strategies
(Beginner)



When you want to start learning Chinese, it can be hard to know where to begin. The problem isn't that there aren't enough resources available – but that there are too many! How can you know which ones are good? How do you know which materials to use first? Especially when you're a beginner, using the right resources to start out will help you learn Chinese faster. So, we worked out this guide which contains the information you need to know as a beginner. There are mainly 3 sections in this e-book which includes the tips & suggestions, Chinese complete guide of each part and learning resource & materials recommendations. This content will help you speed up quickly for how to learn Chinese and start your own venture confidently!

1. Tips & Suggestions for Beginners

If this is your first attempt at learning the Chinese language, then whether you intend to learn by yourself or find a teacher, there is a great learning way you can use to help you how to learn Mandarin Chinese as beginner.

Before trying to learn some new words, you need to practice pronunciation for about 15 lessons. The system of Chinese pronunciation is very different from English. When you learn English, you need to learn the pronunciation of each word one by one, but in Chinese, after you have practiced for about one month, you can read any word in the dictionary as long as there is Pinyin written above it.

When you finish this step successfully, congratulations! You are ready to learn regular lessons. You will learn words first, then grammar, then read passages. You should be proud that you can read

out any Chinese words with Pinyin correctly now.

#1: Choose whether you wish to learn the traditional or simplified characters

Mandarin writing is of two types. One is the traditional one while the other is the simplified one which has less number of strokes. For instance, let us see how the traditional characters differ from the simplified ones for the word 'guó' which means "country":

Traditional: 國

Simplified: 国

In the present times, we can see traditional Chinese characters in use in places like Hong Kong, Macau & Taiwan. In a bid to increase the rate of literacy, the simplified characters were introduced during the early 1950s & 60s. These have gained a lot of popularity and have been accepted as the official writing system in the mainland China & Singapore as well. Most Mandarin courses across the globe teach the simplified form of writing.

There are different viewpoints about both the scripts. Some feel that it is a good idea to stick to the complex but aesthetic looking traditional characters, while others feel that the simplified version is perfect for them. Basically, it is a matter of choice of each individual. One need to consider the place he lives in and the actual reason for mastering Mandarin before opting for the traditional or the simplified script.

#2: Allot proper time and resources in a detailed Mandarin program to make your foundation strong

This holds true for almost all language studies. However, in order to master a language such as Mandarin you need to devote a lot of time in the initial stages to have a strong foundation. This is because an English speaker will find the language completely alien and weird.

The basics are very important in Chinese and you need to master the four tones, the Pinyin which is required in order to pronounce logographic characters as well as mastering the order of the strokes which help in the formation of the characters.

You need to put in endless hours trying to write, listen and speak the basics. I remember the experience of an Italian buddy who used to attend a class once a week at the Confucius Institute in Milan. Despite having attended classes for more than eight months she was unable to master the nuances of the language. She later opted for intense classes at training center located in Shanghai. She used to undergo six hours of training every day for five days a week and within a month there was a marked improvement. She was able to speak and listen like a Chinese toddler. This is indeed some progress to applaud. She later on opted for a lesser intense daily program. She still attributes her success to her intense program due to which she got her fundamentals in place. Even if you opt for a one on one tutoring program, you will not see results if you do not practice it every day.

#3 Make friends with similar non-native Chinese speakers

This is a great idea and you will surely benefit from interacting with people with similar language disabilities:

As they too are not perfect, you will not hesitate if you make mistakes in front of them.

Being enthusiastic and finding someone to share your issues with, you will eventually learn from each other's mistakes.

#4: Watch Chinese channels and listen to Chinese music

Listening to Chinese music and watching Chinese soaps is a fun way to master the language and test your comprehension abilities away from the routine classroom. You can choose whatever you wish to watch. It is not a bad idea to watch some cartoons if you enjoy them. To begin with you can start watching a single show or mini-series. Once you are hooked onto the storyline then you are motivated to continue to watch it. This also helps to enhance your listening skills and mark the accents of the speakers.

#5: Browse the web in Chinese

Switching over to Chinese language social networks will force you to use Chinese characters regularly. This will also give you a platform to meet and interact with other Chinese netizens. Presently you will not be able to use Facebook or Twitter in China. However you can try out the local equivalents, [WeChat](#) & [Weibo](#).

#6: Take the HSK, a standardized Mandarin exam for the non-native speakers

[The Hànyǔ Shuǐpíng Kǎoshì \(HSK\)](#) is basically a Mandarin proficiency exam administered in China & abroad. There are around six levels of achievements in this exam. The most basic one tests you on just 150 words while the toughest one will check your ability to more than 5000 words.

At times people take the HSK to procure admission into a Chinese university while others wish to get a short-term language study scholarship. For those individuals who do not have any specific reason for learning Mandarin I recommend considering the skill mastered as the final goal. In case you have a specific goal in mind then you are motivated to do better.

i. 8 Myths about Mandarin Chinese, and How to Overcome Them

Millions of people all over the world study Mandarin Chinese as a foreign language. However, hundreds of millions are still diverted from learning it by misconceptions and stereotyping.

This article explains why some commonly held myths about learning Mandarin Chinese should be forgotten. It is not much more difficult than any other language.

Myth 1: You can achieve high proficiency level in Mandarin Chinese if you start learning it in childhood

Truth: Children don't memorize Chinese characters quickly and easily as it is supposed. Many studies have consistently demonstrated that adults perform even better than kids under the same conditions. It is typically asserted that older learners' brains are less flexible. However, adults' ability to build strong motivation for subject outweighs all disadvantages.

For me, the main message behind this myth is that children don't have all that knowledge about complexity of Mandarin. Just forget it and you will get the kids' benefits.

Myth 2: You need exceptional memory skills to learn Chinese words

Truth: The difficulty of Chinese words seems to be overestimated. Every Chinese character has its meaning and then used as a part of other words.

Example:

In English, there are words “apple” and “mango”. Letters used in both words have no meaning on their own. We just have to memorize that it is written “a-p-p-l-e” (not “a-p-l”). In Mandarin they say “苹果” for apple and “芒果” for mango. “果” means “fruit” so it is easy to get the meaning. You don’t need to learn new characters every time you learn a new word. After learning about 150 most commonly used characters a student can use them as “building blocks” for other words.

Example:

冰箱 = ice + box = refrigerator

洗衣机 = to wash + clothes + machine = washing machine

手机 = hand + device = mobile phone

Moreover, you will probably love the beauty of some words and how logical is their etymology.



As a conclusion of this passage, good memory is not a must. It is Mandarin that helps to improve memory – whatever is your age!

Myth 3: It is impossible to sound like Chinese due to the difficult tones

Truth: Mandarin is a tonal language. Practicing Chinese four tones is necessary but pronunciation in any language needs practice, too.

The good news is that the number of syllables in Mandarin is very limited. Some people think that each Chinese character has its own pronunciation and students have to learn endless number of sound combinations. It is completely wrong!

In [the chart](#) below you can see pinyin transcription for all possible Chinese syllables. The same transcription is used for dozens of characters so no worries about this!

	a	o	e	i	er	ai	ei	ao	ou	an	en	ang	eng	ong	i	ia	iao	ie
	a	o	e		er	ai		ao	ou	an	en	ang	eng		yi	ya	yao	ye
b	ba	bo				bai	bei	bao		ban	ben	bang	beng		bi		biao	bie
p	pa	po				pai	pei	pao	pou	pan	pen	pang	peng		pi		piao	pie
m	ma	mo	me			mai	mei	mao	mou	man	men	mang	meng		mi		miao	mie
f	fa	fo				fei			fou	fan	fen	fang	feng					
d	da		de			dai	dei	dao	dou	dan	den	dang	deng	dong	di		diao	die
t	ta		te			tai	tei	tao	tou	tan		tang	teng	tong	ti		tiao	tie
n	na		ne			nai	nei	nao	nou	nan	nen	nang	neng	nong	ni		niao	nie
l	la		le			lai	lei	lao	lou	lan		lang	leng	long	li	lia	liao	lie
g	ga		ge			gai	gei	gao	gou	gan	gen	gang	geng	gong				
k	ka		ke			kai	kei	kao	kou	kan	ken	kang	keng	kong				
h	ha		he			hai	hei	hao	hou	han	hen	hang	heng	hong				
z	za		ze	zi		zai	zei	zao	zou	zan	zen	zang	zeng	zong				
c	ca		ce	ci		cai		cao	cou	can	cen	cang	ceng	cong				
s	sa		se	si		sai		sao	sou	san	sen	sang	seng	song				

There are no complicated pronunciation rules like in English (oo = [u]) or in French (eau = [o])!

Myth 4: Mandarin is completely different from other languages; nothing in common with European languages

Truth: Mandarin Chinese has many distinctive features but you will be surprised by some similar concepts.

Basic grammatical terms are the same. There are nouns, adverbs, verbs, prepositions, etc. The sentence structure has much in common with other languages.

Moreover, some proverbs and idioms have straight forward translation into English and Russian (I am sure there are even greater examples in other languages).

Example:

光阴似箭 – guāng yīn sì jiàn – How time flies! – Как летит время!

朵朵玫瑰皆有刺. – duǒ duǒ méi gui jiē yǒu cì. – There is no rose without a thorn. – Не бывает роз без шипов.

水滴石穿. – Shuǐ dī shí chuān. – Constant dripping wears away a stone. (If you persevere, you can achieve whatever goal.) – Вода камень точит. (Если быть упорным, можно достичь любой цели).

Myth 5: It takes years to be able to speak Mandarin on basic level

Truth: Mandarin grammar is much simpler than that of most European languages. There are no articles (like in English), genders (like in German and French) and cases (like in Russian). The verb is not changed to express the tense. The time of the action is indicated in the context.

Here is an example of reported speech in English and in Mandarin:

他说他的妈妈生病了. – He says that his mother was ill.

Literally: He + to say + his + mother + to get ill + particle 了 indicating action in the past.

Myth 6: Learning writing in Mandarin = learning calligraphy

Truth: calligraphy is an art and people who are really talented at it are quite rare (even in China). Nowadays, you don't need to learn writing with a brush. Many foreigners are satisfied with learning just typing in Mandarin on a computer. Typing with pinyin romanization is easy. It looks like a test

with several answer options:

You just insert “ming” and that’s what you see:



Then you make a right choice and the required character appears on the screen!

Myth 7: Living in China is necessary for learning Mandarin

Truth: Of course, it is always good to practice what you have studied in everyday life but even if you have no such a possibility you still can improve speaking skills. [Learning via Skype](#) and other similar tools is very helpful since you can be guided by a native speaker.

Myth 8: Learning Mandarin is waste of time since it will never substitute English as global language.

Truth: I am pretty sure that English will retain its role as a global language but anyway the knowledge of Mandarin gives you amazing career opportunities. In terms of business, China will definitely remain the biggest market for years (credit [trisha](#)). Knowledge of Mandarin is a great foundation, especially when paired with other skills (business, computer science, design, engineering, etc.).

At the very beginning of my studies I often heard: “Are you going to learn Mandarin? Oh, you are crazy! It’s impossible!” Now people exclaim: “Wow! Do you speak Mandarin? It’s unbelievable!” I would say it is neither impossible nor unbelievable. Just try it!

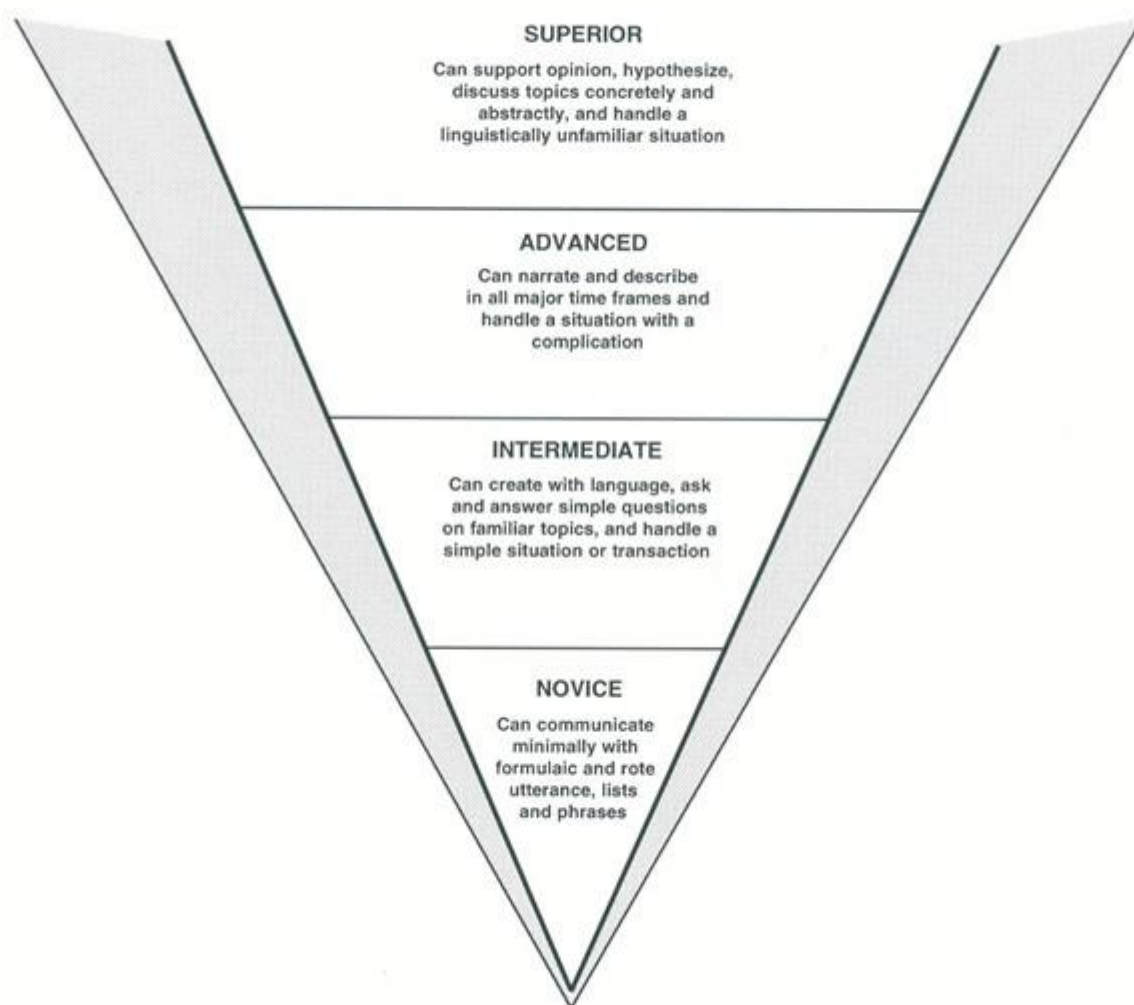
ii. How to Find a Really Good Chinese Teacher to Guide Your Learning

Here are some facts:

I have many foreign friends who are learning Chinese Mandarin and complain to me that Chinese is too difficult to learn, even though they have private tutors to help them. At that time, I always tell them that they are so right and I suggest finding a professional teacher to teach them if they want to learn Chinese seriously.

The fact is the Chinese language is a far-distance language from Indo-European language for most western learners. This language asks for more effort and hours to achieve a functionally native

proficiency, or the superior level according to ACTFL-OPI (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages- Oral Proficiency Interview). Here is ACTFL-OPI chart language acquisition.



To reach the superior level, more hours are needed for a western learner to learn Chinese than one who is learning Spanish. With more detail, we will see the durations of language programs in American Defense Language Institute where 24 foreign languages were taught. The following scale shows the duration of formal instruction (25 class hours a week) of these language programs for English speakers.

Difficulty Categories	Duration of instruction	of Languages
I	26 weeks	French, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish
II	34 weeks	German, Indonesian
III	48 weeks	Dari/Persian Farsi, Hebrew, Hindi, Russian, Serbian/Croatian, Tagalog, Thai, Turkish, Uzbek,

Difficulty Categories	Duration of instruction	Languages
		Urdu
IV	64 weeks	Arabic (Levantine, Iraqi), Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Pashto

I give you the above example not to quench your fire to learn Chinese, but want to tell you that the truth that learning Chinese language is very challenging. It is not a smart idea to learn Chinese from the Rosetta Stone or Chinese for Dummies. In order to save time, it is worth to pay a good and qualified teacher to help you learn Chinese language.

Here are some standards

There are billions of Chinese native speakers in the world and finding a good Chinese teacher doesn't seem to be a difficult problem. However, this thought is a very big misunderstanding. For a long time, teaching Chinese was not seen as a professional skill until 1981, when the Beijing Language and Culture University started to enroll college students who majored in teaching Chinese as a second language (also known as Duiwai Hanyu, 对外汉语). These Chinese native students studied Chinese Language and culture knowledge, foreign language (mostly English) and the methodologies to teach Chinese to foreigners. In short, their training goal is to teach foreigner to speak Chinese in the most efficient way. When you look for a Chinese teacher, do firstly look for someone with the academic background of Duiwai Hanyu.

In 2007, the China National Office for Teaching Chinese as Foreign Language (also known as hanban 汉办) designed a criteria for international Chinese teacher qualification with 5 modules and 10 standards. Here is what Hanban developed as standards for Chinese teachers.

Module 1 Language Abilities and Skills	Standard 1 Chinese Language Abilities and Skills
	Standard 2 Foreign Language Abilities and Skills
Module 2 Culture and Communication	Standard 3 Chinese culture
	Standard 4 Cultural Comparison and Intercultural communication
Module 3 Second Language Acquisition and Learning Strategies	Standard 5 Second language acquisition and Learning Strategies
	Standard 6 Chinese Language Teaching Methodology
Module 4 Teaching Methodology	Standard 7 Testing and Assessment
	Standard 8 Curricula, Syllabi, and Teaching Materials
	Standard 9 Technology-Enhanced Language Teaching
Module 5 Professionalism	Standard 10 Professionalism

Here are some Checking References:

If power in your hand to choose a Chinese teacher, you may need to go through a simple checklist rather than the general standards above. I personally use some references to distinguish amateur Chinese teachers from experienced ones. Here are 10 Yes/No questions that I use for my own evaluations.

- Q1 : Does the teacher has an accent?
- Q2: Does the teacher speak too fast?
- Q3: Does the teacher often say “Do you know XXX pattern”?
- Q4: Does the teacher often say “Do you understand my question”?
- Q5: Does the teacher often say “That’s just how we Chinese say it”?
- Q6: Does the teacher often ask student to “make sentence”?
- Q7: Does the teacher often ask student to “read the text after me”?
- Q8: Does the teacher use too much translation or medium language?
- Q9: Does the teacher speak more than you?
- Q10: Does the teacher often butt in and correct your reply?

If your Chinese teacher has “yes” answers, you probably need to reevaluate your decision. However, it’s your time and money so please choose as you believe is best. You are always welcomed back

to DigMandarin.com to meet some really good and qualified teachers here.

iii. How to Find a Really Good Approach to Guide Your Chinese Learning

#1 The Natural Approach

In the second language-learning field, it's puzzling why nearly all children can successfully learn their mother language quickly while adult learners barely acquire language even if they learned for a whole life. Some people believe since an adult is smarter than child, then the problem must come from their teacher. The teacher teaches grammar rules incorrectly, they should just teach their adult learners in a natural way as their mother did.

Terrell and Krashen's publication, *The Natural Approach* (1983) outlines three basic principles of this approach:

- Focus of instruction is on communication rather than its form.
- Speech production comes slowly and is never forced.
- Early speech goes through natural progression (From yes or no responses, one- word answers, lists of words, short phrases, complete sentences).

In other words, this theory believes that language should be learned naturally over time and practice. For teachers, it means just simply give students enough in-put before asking for out-put. For students, he or she should try to guess and use the language rather than analyze it.

Doesn't this approach sound amazing? However, we are not children anymore.

#2 The Classic Approach

Back to the old times, the Europeans widely learned classic literatures in Greek and Latin. Since the aim to learn these languages is limited to reading ancient classic literatures as formal education rather than use it as a modern language in daily life communication. According this belief, students only need is to learn grammatical rules and words and then apply those rules by translating texts word-for-word. Hence this approach is also known as the Grammar-Translation Approach. Generally speaking, this approach follows a very straight procedure.



This approach was the standard way that languages were taught in schools from the 17th to 19th century and is still in use today in hybrid forms in many different situations. I bet your teachers have asked you questions like "How do you say this in Chinese?" or "Could you translate these sentences into Chinese?"

This approach is acknowledged as a classic and even a work of art because of its simplicity. However, we live in a world that changed since 17th century.

#3 The Audio-lingual Approach

As new technology such as the train and telephone developed in 19th century, people gain more

chances to travel to foreign countries or talk to foreigners. The ability to listen and speak foreign languages gradually overmasters the noble knowledge on classic languages. A Russian psychologist named Pavlov claimed that human learning is no difference from a dog. He believed learning is simply a result of "[Stimulus-Response](#)".

Meanwhile, the outbreak of World War II created the need of soldiers that could speak and listen certain target language speeches. Language teachers who were desperate for a quick approach to teach listening and speaking took this behaviorism theory almost without any hesitation and formed the Audio-Lingual approach. This approach emphasizes the skills of listening and speaking. Some of its distinct features are:

- The structure of a language can be condensed into a limited number of basic sentence patterns.
- The way to acquire these sentence patterns is repetition of dialogues about daily situations.
- Teachers will drill these repetitions and the students imitate.
- The correct answer got the rewards, the wrong answer got the punishment.

This approach is still adored by many "crazy" teachers who treat their students like animals. Surprisingly, lots of students enjoy this type of learning.

#4 The Communicative Approach

With the end of the Word War II and the advent of the world common market, a large population of people needed to learn a foreign language for work or personal reasons. Foreign language study ceased to be confined to the elite academies or to serve certain aims in specific situation. Almost all children in secondary school had the opportunity to study foreign languages. They learned foreign languages in order to communicate with their classmates, the community, and the foreign society that they live in.

Communication is very similar to a jigsaw puzzle. Different person has different pieces of the picture. You will talk and exchange information and get the whole picture right. This process is also how the language education experts now see the nature of second language learning: language should be treated as a tool to communicate rather than a system of signs and rules. Students don't learn how to use the language; they learn the language when they use it. Some techniques recommended by the communicative approach include:

- Role-play/Pair-work
- Interviews/Surveys
- Games
- [Information gap](#) activity
- Language exchanges

A thorough application of this approach is to assign students perform real tasks in life in foreign language rather than merely stimulated practice in classroom. However, it faces a high risk of losing the control of class and students.

#5 The Post-method Approach

In the history of teaching modern languages formally in school, researchers and curriculum designers keep trying to find and apply more effective methods. However, they gradually realized that there is no such a thing called the best method or one pattern that fits all. In fact, a particular aspect of language, such as writing or speaking requires a unique way to teach while an individual

learner prefers a personalized learning strategy. Hence, Allwright(1991) claimed “the death of Method”. Alternatively, Kumaravadivelu (2003) proposed the conception of “Beyond Method” with a frame of 10 macro-strategies that are helpful to learn language in the post-method era.

1. Maximum learning opportunities
2. Facilitate common interaction
3. Minimize common mistakes
4. Activate intuitive hands on learning
5. Foster language awareness
6. Contextualize language information
7. Integrate language skills
8. Promote learner autonomy
9. Ensure social relevance
10. Raise cultural awareness

Conclusion

After looking at these multiple approaches to learning a second language, you can decide on which you think works best for you. Though there is no right way to learning the language, you can take strategies from multiples approaches that best suit your learning style. The important key is that you find what works best for you when it comes to learning Mandarin.

iv. How to Find a Really Fancy Chinese Textbook to Guide Your Learning

Why a Textbook?

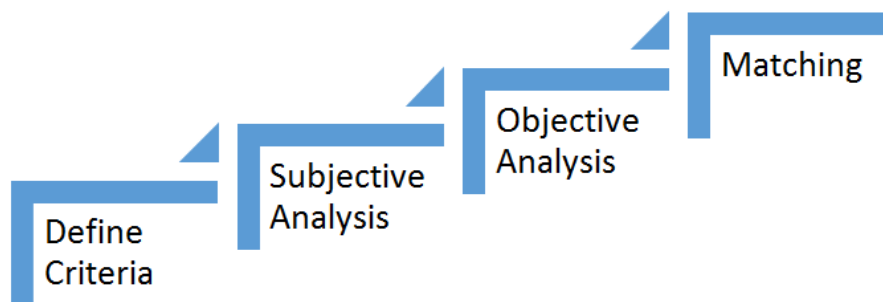
Here are some reasons why a textbook is needed in most situations.

- It can serve as a syllabus
- It provides ready-made teaching contents and learning tasks
- It is a cheap way of providing learning materials
- It allows learners to review material and preview other lessons.
- A textbook is a framework, which organize and regulate the study times.
- A learner without a textbook is often out of focus and teacher-dependent.
- For novice teachers, it provides security, guidance, and support

However, different students have different needs. Topics and materials in a textbook may not be relevant or interesting to all. But we should always keep in mind that any textbook should be chosen carefully and used judiciously.

How to Choose a Good Chinese Textbook?

While the quantity of Chinese textbooks has increased dramatically in recent years, it is difficult to select a good textbook. However, according to English teaching experts Hutchinson and Waters, evaluating textbook is a straightforward and analytical “four steps matching process: matching needs to available solutions” (Hutchinson and Waters 1987:97).



Hutchinson and Waters defined criteria based on the aspects of audience, aims, content, methodology and others to total to 21 items. This process can be used to choose a Chinese textbook. The common-core criteria and analysis questions can be summarized as following:

Does the Textbook Follow a Specific Teaching Approach?

Sharing of a vision (theory or approach) about:

- The nature of language
- The nature of learning
- How the theory can be put to applied use

How is the Content Presented?

Stating purpose(s) and objective(s)

- For the total course
- For individual units

Selection and its rationale

- Coverage
- Grading
- Organization
- Sequencing

Satisfaction of the syllabus

- To the teacher
 - Providing a guide book
 - Giving advice on the methodology
 - ✓ Giving theoretical orientations
 - ✓ Key to the exercises
 - ✓ Supplementary materials

To the student

- Unit-by-unit instruction
- Design (relevant, free from unnecessary details, colorful, etc.)
- Periodic revisions
- Workbook
- Exercises and activities

- In the classroom
- Homework
- Sample exercises with clear instructions
- Varied and numerous

Periodic test sections

Accompanying audio-visual aids

Physical Make-up and Others

- Appropriate Size & weight
- Attractive layout
- Durability
- High quality of editing and publishing
- Appropriate title
- Acceptable price

Any Textbook Recommendations?

I have taught Mandarin Chinese in Beijing, Shanghai and in Kentucky for over ten years and have used many of textbooks in different situations. I cannot say which specific one is the best because it is situation-sensitive. However, here are ones that I personally prefer and have used.

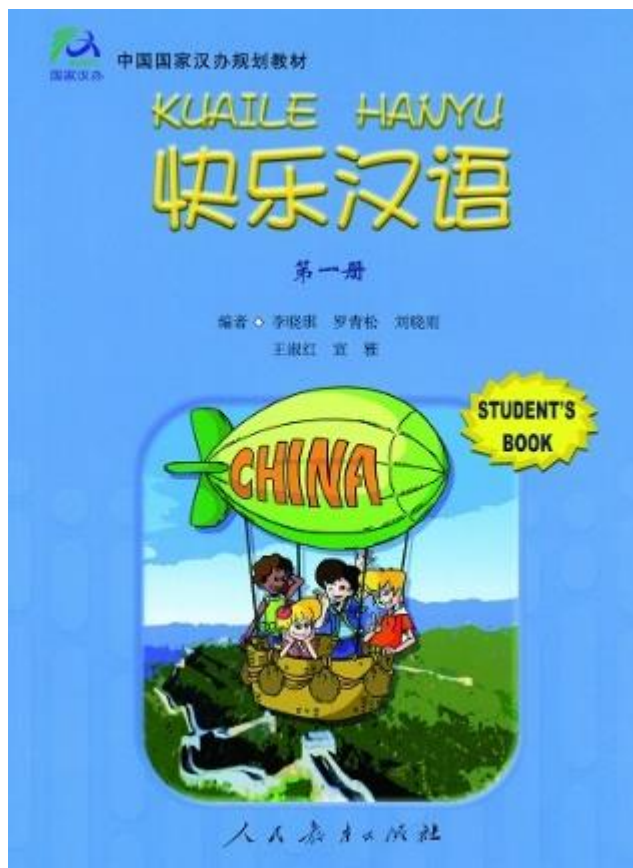
[《汉语会话 301 句》 Conversational Chinese 301](#)



This book claims it is “the most popular textbook for foreigners all over the world”. The Beijing Language and Culture University Press first published this book in 1990 and it unexpectedly became a star item. The main reason for its popularity was how well it fit the need of a short-term course. This book uses 300 basic sentences to build up conversations in various daily situations. Learners could master simple Chinese sentences in a short period of time.

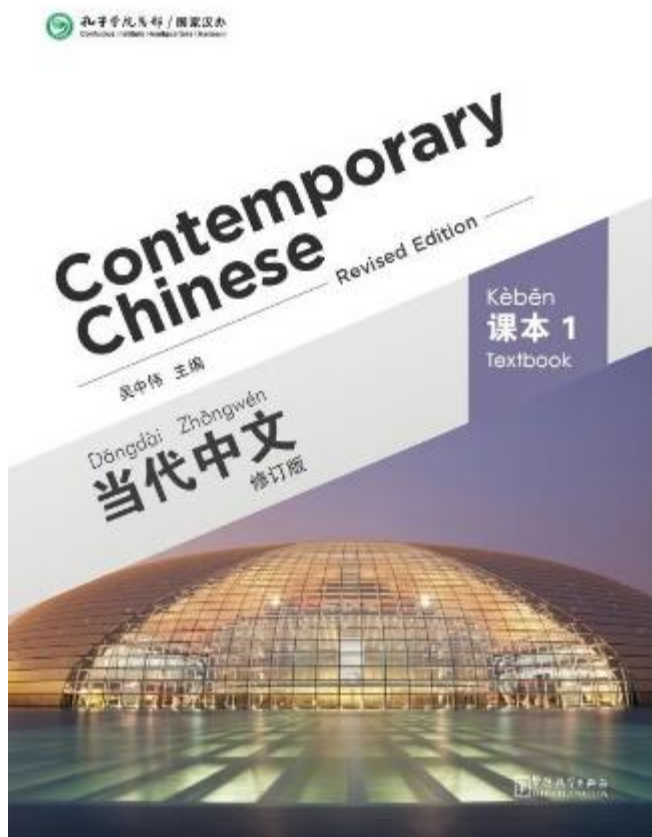
If you want to learn some survival Chinese before you journey to China next month, and you happen to have 1 or 2 hours’ time to learn 10 sentences per day, take a look at this textbook.

《快乐汉语》 Kuaile Hanyu



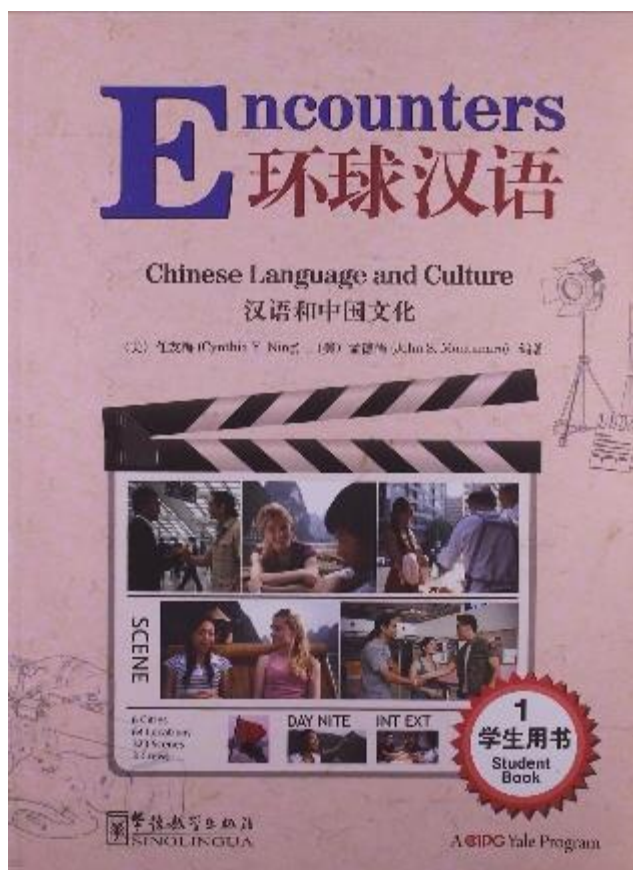
Kuaile Hanyu literally translates to Happy Chinese, is a set of Chinese teaching materials specially compiled for teenagers. Kuaile Hanyu is initially designed for Britain middle school student aged from 11 to 16. Therefore, it suits the psychological level and learning requirements of young learners. It has fun content while it uses few and simple words to covers topics of school and daily life. The entire set consists of a student's book, a teacher's book, a workbook, flash cards, wall charts and CDs. Hence practical choice for teachers and students.

《当代中文》 Contemporary Chinese



This teaching book set consists of 4 volumes, each of which includes a textbook, teacher's guide, workbook, practice test book and additional reading materials. It takes the task-based teaching theory where these textbooks integrate trainings on speaking, listening, reading and writing skills; while focuses on difficult and important key languages points. It is a balance between basic listening, speaking, reading and writing skills as well as the ability to communicate effectively in Chinese. Besides English version, it was also translated into French, Russian, Arabic, Thai, Serbian, Filipino versions and so on. This textbook widely used among Confucius Institutes and overseas Chinese schools.

[《环球汉语》 Encounters: Chinese Language and Culture](#)



It is more like a TV series rather than a textbook. Accompanied with this textbook are hours of video materials, comprising dramatic episodes, cultural segments, and animations all shot in China by Hollywood producers. It immerses learners in the Chinese language and culture through video episodes.

*In Dec. 2014, The Confucius Institute Headquarter reports that 54 languages and 1300 kinds of Chinese textbooks have been published in last decade.

2. Chinese Structure Complete Guide

i. Chinese Pronunciation

Pronunciation is the basic part of mastering mandarin Chinese. If you want to learn this language well, it's necessary to lay a good foundation about Chinese pronunciation at the beginning.

No matter which level are you in, making sure your pronunciation correctly is definitely necessary and never too late. All in all, a good beginning is half the battle. With this guide, you can learn Chinese pronunciation easier in a correct way.

Part 1: What is Pinyin?

Chinese is not a phonetic language. The pronunciation is not related to the writing of Chinese

words (characters). Pinyin is the special system, created for people to learn Mandarin pronunciation. Pinyin transcribes the Chinese characters so people can pronounce it. It may be used as an input method to enter Chinese characters into computers or electronics as well.

The writing of Pinyin is similar to English alphabet. You can pronounce every single sound out in Chinese using pinyin. However, you should aware that the Chinese pronunciation and spelling of pinyin letters are different from English letters. The sounds, which the letters of pinyin represent, do not correspond exactly to the sounds that the letters of English represent. So, you can't pronounce pinyin as if they were English.

One Chinese sound is associated with one syllable and each Chinese character has its own pinyin syllable.



There are three parts in a pinyin syllable, which are the Initial, Final and Tone. Initial and final represent the segmental phonetic portion of the language, rather than letter by letter.



Initial Final Tone Syllable

n + i + ˇ = nǐ

h + ao + \ = hào

t + a + – = tā

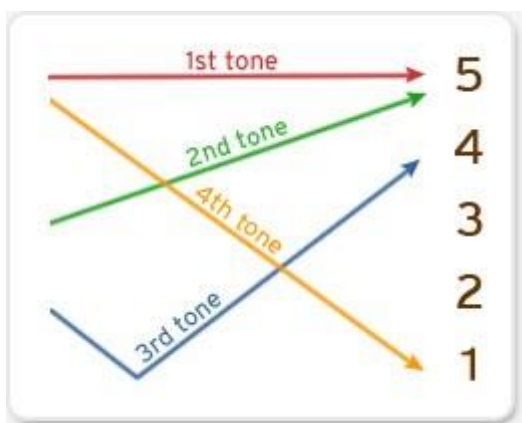
[Chinese PinYin Chart with Audio \(click here\)](#)

	a	o	e	i	i	er	ai	ei	ao	ou	an	en	ang	eng	ong	i	ia	iao	ie
	a	o	e			er	ai		ao	ou	an	en	ang	eng		yi	ya	yao	ye
b	ba	bo					bai	bei	bao		ban	ben	bang	beng		bi		biao	bie
p	pa	po					pai	pei	pao	pou	pan	pen	pang	peng		pi		piao	pie
m	ma	mo	me				mai	mei	mao	mou	man	men	mang	meng		mi		miao	mie
f	fa	fo					fei		fou	fou	fan	fen	fang	feng					
d	da		de				dai	dei	dao	dou	dan	den	dang	deng	dong	di		diao	die
t	ta		te				tai	tei	tao	tou	tan		tang	teng	tong	ti		tiao	tie
n	na		ne				nai	nei	nao	nou	nan	nen	nang	neng	nong	ni		niao	nie
l	la		le				lai	lei	lao	lou	lan		lang	leng	long	li	lia	liao	lie
g	ga		ge				gai	gei	gao	gou	gan	gen	gang	geng	gong				
k	ka		ke				kai	kei	kao	kou	kan	ken	kang	keng	kong				
h	ha		he				hai	hei	hao	hou	han	hen	hang	heng	hong				
z	za		ze	zi			zai	zei	zao	zou	zan	zen	zang	zeng	zong				
c	ca		ce	ci			cai		cao	cou	can	cen	cang	ceng	cong				
s	sa		se	si			sai		sao	sou	san	sen	sang	seng	song				

Part 2: What is Tones?

Mandarin Chinese is a tonal language, which means that the way a sound is pronounced directly affects the meaning of what is said. Mandarin's tones give the language a very distinctive quality, but the tones can also be a source of miscommunication if not given due attention.

There are four main tones and one neutral tone in mandarin Chinese (or, as some say, five tones). Each tone has a distinctive pitch contour, which can be graphed using the following Chinese 5-level system.



First Tone	High and level sound, naturally prolonged.	A straight horizontal line: ¯ e.g. mā
Second Tone	Rising tone, from low to high, just like the pitch in question	A rising diagonal line: ´ e.g. má
Third Tone	First falling and then going up again	A curved "dipping" line: ˇ e.g. mǎ
Forth Tone	Total falling tone which starts out very high and falls short and strong	A dropping diagonal line: ` e.g. mà
Neutral Tone	Pronounced very light and quick	Have no tone mark e.g. ma

I've seen some posts claim that the Chinese tones are just like English, which convey the attitude or feeling of a speaker, however, it's not the case. This idea is mixing up two different concepts. English doesn't have tones since words don't change the meanings when you pronounce them with different intonations. However, in Chinese, even with the same initial and final, different tones represent different characters and meanings. There are many Chinese characters with the same initials and finals. E.g.

mā	má	mǎ	mà	ma
妈	麻	马	骂	吗
mother	fibre	horse	curse	question mark



Common Tone Rules

- Third Tone Sandhi

When a third tone followed by another third tone, it should be pronounced as a second tone automatically. But the writing script should remain unchanged as the third tone mark. For example:

你好 (nǐ + hǎo) → 你好 (ní hǎo)

我很好 (wǒ + hěn + hǎo) → 我很好 (wó hén hǎo)

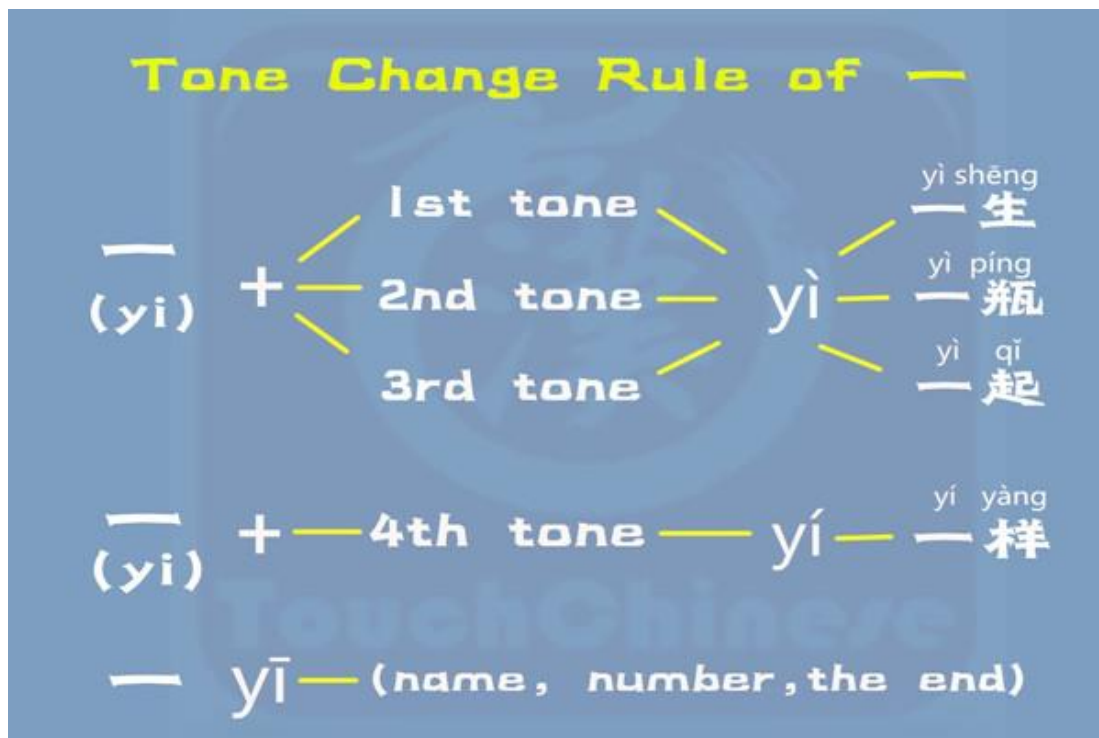
- Tone sandhi of “不”

“不” becomes a second tone when followed by a fourth tone character. It is a fourth tone syllable by itself and when followed by other four tones then the following will happen.



- Tone sandhi of “—”

“一” is pronounced in first tone when it's by itself, at the end of a word, or used as a number. When it is followed by a first tone, second tone, or third tone character though, “一” changes to the fourth tone. It is pronounced in the second tone when it precedes a fourth tone.



Part 3: Why Tones Matter?

If you can't recognize the tone, you might always struggle figuring out what Chinese people said. And there are also many [embarrassing situations you will encounter](#) when communicating with Chinese people.

I met many Chinese learning quitters. They told me that they did want to learn mandarin. After they read the pinyin chart for two or three times in the first two lessons, they thought these Romanization letters were a piece of cake and it was time to move forward to learn more “real Chinese.” As a result of spending too little time on mastering the tones and proper pronunciations, the subsequent overload of similar vocabulary ruined their confidence, so they had to quit. Enough practice on your ears and mouth will help you survive, even though the beginning might be tedious and tough. Once you go through this essential part, you will lay an unbreakable foundation for your Chinese learning.

That's why the tones matter.

Common Difficulties You Might meet

The purpose of this section is to clarify some common mistakes and difficulties you might meet when learning mandarin Chinese pronunciations. There are some distinct sounds in Chinese that are tricky to non-native speakers. Let's conquer them one by one, thus there is less barrier in your pronunciation path.

Most of the difficult pinyin sounds are initials, like zh/ch/sh, z/c/s, j/q/x and r.

zh Like “j” in “jerk”, but with the tip of the tongue curled farther back

ch	Like “ch” in “church”, but with the tip of the tongue curled farther back
sh	Like “sh” in “ship”, but with the tip of the tongue curled farther back
z	Like “ts” in “cats”
c	Like “ts” in “cats”, with aspiration
s	Pronounced as in English, e.g. “s” in “see”
j	As “j” in jam and jump, but softer and the tongue touches the lower front teeth.
q	As “chee” in “cheese”, but softer and the tongue touches the lower front teeth
x	As “shee” in “sheep”, but softer and the tongue touches the lower front teeth
r	As in “right” in English, but with lips unrounded, and the tip of the tongue curled farther back. Always pronounce the Chinese “r” sound with a nice smile.

There is also a final “ü” that most foreigners can’t pronounce very well.

Key:

There is a pinyin “i” sound in it, and you need to make your mouth shape as the pinyin “u”, then the “ü” sound comes out.

Part 4: Tips and Suggestions: How to improve your Chinese pronunciation

1. Master the basic rules of pronunciation and tones.

Knowing basic greetings like “你好” “你好吗” in Chinese is not hard, but advancing beyond the warm up greetings is quite different endeavor. As a beginner, the most important thing is be familiar with all pinyin sounds, spelling rules and tone changing rules. If possible, you’d better find a professional teacher who can speak standard mandarin Chinese and explain the differences among those similar sounds properly.

There are many learning experiences sharing about [how to improve your Chinese pronunciation](#). Regarding the tones, besides the regular tones practice, there are some learners who share their methods like [mastering without using tone marks](#).

2. Having Enough input: Make your own language environment

If you are learning Chinese in China or luckily be surrounded by a group of native speakers, just try to talk to them with what you’ve learnt. If you can’t follow them at the beginning, don’t feel embarrassed or upset. It’s a quite common phase. What you need to do is at least distinguishing the words you’ve learnt and be more familiar with the intonation Chinese language make. Gradually you can connect all the words and figure out what they are talking about.

If you don’t have the language environment, make it yourself! There are tons of online learning resources (well, surely you can find them at [Dig Mandarin](#).) No matter Chinese learning audios or videos, you can make use of your fragment time to listen. Sometimes, the learning content is a little bit tedious, afterwards you can find some [Chinese songs to perfect your accent](#). Also, learning from movies and TV shows is also a great way to train your sense of the language, and know more about Chinese culture as well.

3. Having Enough output

i. Practice in words, phrases and sentences

Don't just practice the individual characters. There is phonetic change in the flow of speech, especially the tones. When you first begin to study Mandarin Chinese pronunciation, it is beneficial to practice pairs of tones. Begin with a word you already know, such as 很好(hěnhǎo, very good). This phrase uses the second then the third tone. Say this phrase out loud several times and listen for the tone and rhythm of the syllables. Studying this natural rhythm of the language will help you pronounce new words you come across. Also, the increased accuracy of your Mandarin pronunciation will help you say sentences more smoothly. The start is of course tough, however after going through it; the longer sentences will be much easier for you.

ii. Slow down and be clear

Pay attention that you do not speak too fast. It's very natural to speak in a normal speed just like the native speaker. But you are just a beginner who might not pronounce the standard sound. Speed is the last thing you should care about. Just SLOW DOWN! Make your sounds clear and correct. If people can't even understand you, do you seriously care about your speaking speed? After all, a successful communication is the goal and accuracy is the most important thing.

iii. Practice makes perfect

As we mentioned above, you need to cultivate a keen sense of Chinese language by enough input. Some when you are practice by yourself and not with others, you are creating the illusion that you are speaking Chinese well. The truth might be only you yourself can understand or of course your teacher can guess what you are trying to say exactly. So the only key is practice, practice and practice. If once doesn't work, then do it twice, triple..... You will finally get it.

4. Learn from your mistakes

As you know, Chinese people are very kind, so encouragement and compliment will be the main trend of their comments to your speaking. Confidence is necessary, but their kindness is not your reason to ignore the mistakes and your foreign pronunciation. Ask your Chinese friends to point out your inaccuracy and specific problems directly. Of course, it can't be better if the one friend is a professional teacher. Then take down the notes of your common mistakes and analyze them one by one. This process will help you conquer your problems. It may be discouraging sometimes to hear about so many mistakes, but you will learn a lot from them quickly and it will help you to improve much faster than you think.

You also can observe if other people understand you. Regardless their kindness, understanding is a good start anyhow. In addition, you can try to prepare a paragraph on a specific topic, then record your own speech. Listen to it several times to see if it's weird in your perspective. Then ask your Chinese friends or teacher help you checking it. If possible, you can also compare your own recordings with the native speaker's. It's very clear to hear the differences of sounds, rhythms and intonation. Adjusting and improving your pronunciation is what you can do naturally. Focusing on the difficulties and repeat it slower. Just make sure you are pronouncing the right way.

5. Review all the time

Acquiring accurate pronunciation is a long-term battle. Don't be naïve as if you can master the authentic pronunciation in one shot. Record all your mistakes and misunderstanding of some specific concepts. Review your notes from time to time. It will call your attention and remind you the right way you should act. One day you will finally master them all.

Part 5: Resources

1. Video Lessons

1) [Learn Complete Chinese Pronunciation in 16 Days!](#) - This pronunciation course is produced by DigMandarin. With this course, you will

- Know how to pronounce every Chinese sound clearly with the proper accent.
- Understand the phonetic alphabet (Pinyin) and how it relates to pronunciation.
- Learn each of the 21 Pinyin Initials.
- Learn each of the basic 6 Finals, as well as the 30 compound Finals.
- Know how to reduce your accent and sound more like a native.
- Learn and understand the trickiest letters that trip up most beginners, including the dreaded Mandarin tones.
- Experience detailed explanations which show you how to shape your mouth, place your tongue, and produce the required sounds.

2. Audio Lessons

a) [Chinesepod](#) – No doubts that Chinesepod is one of the most well-structured podcast mandarin course. There are numerous lessons in it and the topics cover from the beginning to advanced level about grammar, conversations and discussions with interactive exercises. And we've also preferred their [Pinyin program](#) for the beginners to learn.

b) [ChineseClass101](#) – ChineseClass101's lesson number is pretty big. Regarding the [pronunciation part](#), they provide the learners 5 episodes to illustrate the Chinese word construction, tones, related tone rules and difficult sounds. It basically covers the main idea of mandarin Chinese pronunciation.

3. Tools & APP

a) [Pinyin Tools](#) – If you want to learn about how to use Pinyin to aid your Chinese verbal language acquisition, Dig Mandarin recommends for apps: pinyin chart, tone chart, Pinyin to Chinese character converter app.

b) [Pleco](#) – This dictionary is one of the most useful and frequently used ones for people learning Mandarin. You can search by either the Chinese character or pinyin spelling. If you have heard a new Chinese word that you do not understand, you can easily search through this site to figure out what it is. There is a premium version as well which includes audio pronunciations.

4. Book

[New Practice Chinese Readers](#) – This Mandarin Chinese textbook is my personal favorite. It combines a carefully laid-out learning structure ideal for language with audio files for better pronunciation and understanding. The lessons include vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar and sentence structure and even cultural information. New Practice for Chinese Readers is [available on Amazon](#) and from major book retailers.

ii. Chinese Grammar

If pronunciation is the foundation of Chinese learning, then grammar must be the skeletal framework around which it is built. With good grammar, people can then express themselves with proper meaning. Even if you know what all the Chinese characters mean, you will make no sense

without proper order in your sentences.

Mandarin Chinese grammar is not as difficult as you would think. I believe learning the grammar of any language is done through constant repetition.

In Chinese, the sentence words order is especially important, partly as a consequence of its lack of case endings for nouns.

Although Chinese is not the only language where the sentence words order is important, it is extremely important to take care of the right Chinese Sentence order. A slight difference in the words order may result in a completely different sentence and meaning. For example:

Some person/people have come

来人了

(lái rén Le)

The person/people (we expecting to) have come

人来了

(rén lái Le)

The meanings are different in the two sentences. Also, the Chinese sentence words order is very different from English, like this example:

English: who are you?

Chinese: 你是谁? (nǐ shì shéi?)

So, a word-by-word translation from English to Chinese would result in meaningless sentences in Chinese. There is no way to make sense of the Chinese words order from English. The aim of this article is to explain clearly and intuitively the rules of the Chinese sentence structure and point out some important exceptions.

In summary, The Chinese sentence structure is as follows:

Subject + time preposition + Time + location preposition + Location (from the biggest to the smallest) + how (can be adverb or a phrase containing a preposition.) + Verb + time duration + indirect object + Object

Here are some tips you can follow to better remember the sentence structure.

1. The subject can be located after the time.
2. Sometime the duration of time word is an adverb phrase, which describes a verb or an adjective phrase describing a noun. In this case it is located before the verb (or noun) and not after it. Pay attention not to let it confuse you. (Look at examples)

Since coming to China, I learnt Chinese very hard for three hours every day with my sister in Beijing University.

自从来到中国，我和妹妹每天在北京大学努力学三个小时的中文

Time S Location Adv.V. O

(zì cóng lái dào zhōng guó, wǒ hé mèimei měi tiān zài běi jīng dà xué nǚ lì xué xí sān gè xiǎo shí de zhōng wén)

My dog lies in the couch of living room all day.

我的狗 整天 在客厅的沙发上 躺着 睡懒觉。

S Time Location How V

(wǒ de gǒu zhěng tiān zài kè tīng de shā fā shàng tǎng zhe shuì lǎn jiào)

Important Exceptions in the Chinese sentence order

As we know the basic Chinese sentence order is: **Subject + Time (when) + Place + verb**. There are **some special verbs, which seem to be allowed to break the rules**. These verbs are put before the place and not after it as usual. For these verbs, we have the structure:

Subject + Time (when) + verb + Place

Which verbs are breaking the rules? There are two kinds of these verbs:

1. Verbs implying movement or location:

住(zhù/live), 放(fàng/put), 坐(zuò/sit), 站(zhàn/stand), 走(zǒu/walk), 去(qù/go), 达到(dá dào/arrive), 来(lái/come), 飞(fēi/fly), 扔(rēng/throw), 待(dāi/stay), etc.

2. Verbs that express variability from one situation to another in this place:

结(jiē/ bear fruit), 积累/积(jī lěi / accumulate), 生长(shēng zhǎng/ grow), 烹饪(pēng rèn/cooking), etc.

Here are several exception examples:

The food is put in the stove

食物放在炉子上 (type 2)

(shí wù fàng zài lú zi shàng)

Bananas grow on the tree.

香蕉结在树上 (type 2)

(xiāng jiāo jiē zài shù shàng)

Don't throw on the ground.

不要扔在地上 (type 1)

(bú yào rēng zài dì shàng)

Kids always like sitting on the ground.

孩子总是喜欢坐在地上 (type 1)
(hái zi zǒng shì xǐ huan zuò zài dì shàng)

This may be a lot of information to take in and may be overwhelming but don't fret. If you continue to listen and read as much real Chinese as you can, it will let you get a natural feel for these exceptions and put them before the place word naturally. These verbs can be also used in the normal order (after the place) in case we want to emphasize the place. For example:

I live in US
我在美国住。
(wǒ zài měi guó zhù) (not in China).

Take an easy Chinese sentence, which still contains most of the sentence grammatical words (like subject, object, verb, prepositions and etc.) and say it to yourself for some days until you will be able to recite it fluently. Then, whenever you need to compose a sentence in Chinese only check the situation in this sentence frame.

For more structures or uses, you can check [here to get an e-book about grammar](#) points collection of Chinese.

iii. Chinese Characters

Chinese characters (汉字, hànzi) comprise the oldest continuously used system of writing in the world, but their complex structures and formations often terrify many modern learners. To add to the confusion, certain countries (mainland China, Singapore, and Malaysia) use the Simplified version of certain characters (简体字), while others (Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macau, and, to a limited extent, South Korea) use the corresponding Traditional version (繁体字).

But have no fear: If you are determined to learn Chinese and master the writing of Chinese characters, we have the tools and techniques for you here to help you overcome your anxiety and achieve success in your learning journey.

Are Chinese Characters Worth Learning? How Do I Get Started?

As we all know, Chinese uses characters as the basis of its written system. This aspect makes it quite different from most other languages. This characteristic has also become a barrier for westerners to learn Chinese. Some individuals decide not to learn the language at all because they think they could never master it. Others are brave enough to get started but decide to learn only to speak. Every year I get students who ask me the same question: "Should I learn characters?" So first we will talk about learning characters.

Should I learn characters?

To answer this question, first ask yourself what your goal is.

1. If your goal is short term, i.e. a trip or greeting to your Chinese business partner, the answer is “NO”. Obviously, you only need some survival phrases. It just isn’t worth it.
2. For a long-term purpose, i.e. mastering the language or passing the HSK test, the answer is “YES”. You might think you don’t need to master the language 100% if you just plan to spend 1-2 years in China, so do you really need to learn characters? The answer is still “yes”. Despite what you might think, it will make your Chinese learning easier and not the other way around. A few reasons here:

1). You can’t survive in China without reading characters. Although we all learn pinyin, you seldom see anything written in pinyin in China. You can’t even recognize a sign without knowing characters.



2). The spoken language is more confusing if you don’t know characters. 致癌(zhì’ái) and 治癌(zhì’ái) are exactly the same in pinyin, but one means “to cause cancer” and the other means “to treat cancer”. The more words you learn, the more trouble you will have.

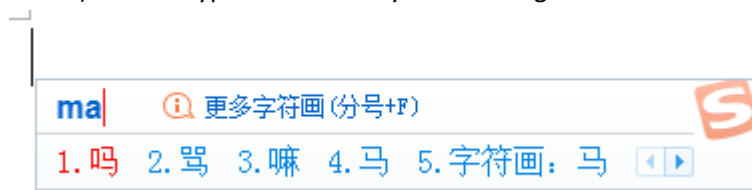
3). Understanding new words will be easier if you’ve studied the writing. If you know characters, you can guess the meaning of new words. For example, if you know “车 chē” (vehicle, A1 level) and “马 mǎ”(horse, A1 level), you can probably get “马车(mǎchē)” is “carriage”. If you only know pinyin, there are six characters marked as “mǎ”; it will be hard for you to figure out which one is relevant. As you see, you will be able to make out Chinese words when you are able to recognize the characters. So, I suggest you learn characters from the very beginning!

How should I learn characters?

Now you make your decision. Writing characters is a bit like drawing a picture. Even Chinese kids

need to learn for several years before they master it. You may be wondering, “How can I do it?” Don’t worry—we have tips here!

1. Learn rules and strokes for handwriting first. Although there are thousands of characters, there are only 4 main types of Chinese characters and only 8-40 (depending on how you count) strokes used to write these characters, and the order is rule based. For example: always write from left to right, from top to bottom, and from outside to inside.
2. Learn radicals and components second. Along with strokes, radicals and components are also very helpful. For example: the radical “氵” (three drops of water) is always on the left side of a character and it usually implies the character is somehow related to water. If you learn a new character with it, you can memorize it as “the left part is three drops of water”.
3. Recognizing characters is much easier and more important than handwriting. Two reasons here:
 - 1) Before you can write, you need to know how to read. That’s the same principle in language learning.
 - 2) You can type characters if you can recognize them. Like this:



You only need to choose which one you want. Even Chinese people type characters more than they handwrite nowadays. This can save you a lot of time and energy.

Of course, handwriting is still useful for memorizing what characters look like, so having a piece of paper and a pencil around is still a good idea.

So far, you may already have known a little bit of Chinese characters. For further learning, you can start from here to [download the complete guide e-book](#) of characters learning.

3. Resource & Materials

Online Chinese Video & Audio Courses

[Learn Complete Chinese Pronunciation in 16 Days!](#)

[Your China Adventure - Survival Chinese & Culture Tips](#)

[750 Commonly Used Chinese Sentences in Conversations](#)

[Hands-on Writing Course: How to Write Chinese Characters](#)

[Mock Test Analysis - HSK Level 1](#)

[Mock Test Analysis - HSK Level 2](#)

Tips & Suggestions:

[Why It's Important to Choose A Professional Mandarin Tutor](#)

[Learning with A Chinese Tutor](#)

[Checklist: Use All the Online Tools for Learning Mandarin Chinese](#)

[9 Tips to Help You Choose Chinese Lessons by Skype](#)

[Recommended Cool Games for Mandarin Learning](#)

[Using Topics and Scenarios to Make Your Chinese Learning More Efficient](#)

[Studying Mandarin Chinese: Flashcards Everywhere!](#)

[Top Ten YouTube Channels for Learning Mandarin Chinese](#)

[A Comprehensive Review of the Hottest Mandarin Blogs for Learners](#)

Resources & materials:

[Chinese Pinyin Chart \(audio & PDF download\)](#)

[All about HSK \(Introduction; Information; Preparation; Mock Paper; Training; PDF download\)](#)

[Learn Chinese Proverbs \(PDF download\)](#)

[Travel Chinese Conversations \(PDF download\)](#)

[Commonly Used Chinese Words Usage](#)

[Top 10 Most Common Chinese Characters](#)

[9 Useful Chinese Conversational Phrases You Need to Know](#)

[120 Daily Used Short Sentences \(PDF download\)](#)

Chinese Culture:

[How to Address People in Chinese](#)

[Chinese Greetings You Need to Know](#)

[5 Lucky Things in Chinese Culture](#)

[10 Cultural Shocks in China](#)

[How to Choose Your very Own Chinese Name](#)